DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 174 349 PS 010 776

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TITLE Sex Differences in Emotionality in Children: Daycare and Preschool Parent Percepticns and Expectations.
PUB DATE Mar 78
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association (Washington, D.C., March 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Affective Behavior; Emotional Experience; *Expectation; Parental Background; *Parent Attitudes; *Preschool Children; Sex Differences; *Sex Stereotypes; Social Class; *Social Differences

ABSTRACT

Parents' perceptions and preferences concerning sex differences in emotionality in children were investigated by means of a questionnaire which separated attitudes about intensity from attitudes about frequency of emotional expression. The attitudes of 24 working-class parents (4 males and 20 females) whose children attended day care were compared to the attitudes of 23 middle-class parents (1 male and 22 females) whose children were enrolled in preschool programs. The parents were asked four questions about each of four emotions (anger, fear, happiness, and sadness), with a separate rating scale for boys and girls. Results indicated the following significant differences between the two groups of parents: (1) only day care parents perceived a sex difference in frequency of emotional expression, perceiving boys as showing anger more often than girls and girls as showing fear more often than boys; (2) only day care parents reported that they desired sex differences in frequency of emotional expression, desiring boys to show anger more often than girls and girls to show fear more often than boys; (3) only day care parents perceived sex differences in the intensity of emotional expression, perceiving boys as showing anger more intensely than girls and girls as showing sadness and fear more intensely than boys; (4) only day care parents reported desiring sex differences in intensity, desiring boys to show anger more intensely than girls and girls to show fear more intensely than boys. No differences were found between attitudes about frequency and attitudes about intensity of emotional expression. (Author/SS)

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ED174349

Sex Differences in Emotionality in Children: Daycare and Preschool Parent Perceptions and Expectations

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Our previous research (Birnbaum & Croll, Note 1) revealed the existence of specific stereotypes about sex differences in emotionality in preschool-aged children. Specifically, we found that preschoolers associated anger with maleness and happiness, sadness, and fear with femaleness. This research, however, provides no information regarding the possible etiology of these stereotypes. There are, of course, numerous ways in which children might acquire such stereotypes about sex differences in emotionality. An obvious possibility is that parents, as prime socializing agents, possess similar beliefs which they may instill in their children.

Few studies have asked parents directly how they believe the sexes differ. Rothbart and Maccoby (1966) devised a questionnaire to assess parents' perceptions of whether boys and girls differ on certain traits and behaviors and parents' opinions as to whether sex differences in those traits and behaviors should exist. On the parent perception part of the questionnaire, parents indicated whether an item was more characteristic of boys or of girls or whether they saw no boy-girl differences. A limitation of this approach is that it measures the direction but not the strength of the parents' attitudes. One purpose of the present study was to examine parents' perceived and desired sex differences in emotionality in children using a method that measures strength of attitude as well as direction.

PS010776

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., March 1978.

In addition, since Allen and Haccoun (1976) have reported finding sex differences in college students for various emotions with intensity but not frequency measures, the study was also designed to examine parents' perceived and desired sex differences in emotionality in children using a method that separates attitudes about frequency from attitudes about intensity of emotional expression. Since previous research using subjects of varying social classes has produced conflicting results (e.g., Lambert et al., 1971; Rothbart & Maccoby, 1966), implicating the importance of the social class variable, the attitudes of a group of middle-class preschool parents were compared to those of a group of working-class daycare parents.

Method

Subjects. Forty-seven adults served as subjects in the study. Twenty-three of the subjects, one male and twenty-two females, were parents of 3- to 5-year-old children attending a summer preschool program in a middle-class, urban, residential area. Another twenty-four of the subjects, 4 males and 20 females, were parents of 3- to 6-year-old children attending a daycare program in which ninety percent of the families are government-subsidized.

Materials. In the questionnaire used in this study subjects were asked to answer four questions about each of four emotions on separate scales for boys and girls. For each of the four emotions, there were two questions about its intensity of expression in boys and in girls. The first of the two questions asked about perceived sex characteristics (e.g., how *often* does a typical boy or girl *show anger*, how *strongly* does a typical boy or girl *show anger*), whereas the second asked about desired sex characteristics (e.g., how *often* do you believe a typical boy or girl *should show anger*, how *strongly* do you believe a typical boy or girl *should show anger*).

The questionnaire employed 5-point rating scales throughout. All four questions for a given emotion were on the same page in the order: frequency perceived, frequency desired, intensity perceived, intensity desired. Although replies to the questionnaire were anonymous, subjects were asked to provide certain demographic data (i.e., sex; age range; intact or single-parent family; number, age, and sex of children).

Procedure. Parents were given the questionnaire when they arrived at the daycare or community center to pick up their children. Upon arrival at the center, parents were asked to fill out the questionnaire by the female experimenter, who explained that it was part of a research project and that replies were anonymous. Parents were encouraged to fill out the questionnaire on the spot and to return it to a box provided in the center, although parents were allowed to take the questionnaires home and return them later. Eighty-seven percent of the questionnaires were returned by the preschool parents and eighty-one percent of the questionnaires were returned by the daycare parents.

Results

Subjects' responses were converted to numerical scores using 5-point rating scales with low scores indicative of low frequency and intensity and high scores indicative of high frequency and intensity. Separate analyses were conducted for each of the four questions: frequency perceived, frequency desired, intensity perceived, intensity desired. The basic analyses were 3 x 2 x 4 analyses of variance with one between-subjects factor (population) and two within-subjects factors (rated sex and emotion).

Frequency Perceived. The analysis of the perceived frequency ratings revealed significant main effects for rated sex ($p < .001$) and emotion ($p < .001$). The two-way sex x emotion, ($p < .001$) interaction was also

significant as was the three-way sex x emotion x population interaction ($p < .005$).

Post hoc tests revealed that only daycare parents perceived a sex difference in frequency of emotion, perceiving boys as showing anger more often than girls and girls as showing fear more often than boys.

Frequency Desired. The analysis of the desired frequency ratings revealed a significant main effect only for emotion ($p < .001$). The two-way sex x emotion interaction was significant, ($p < .001$) as was the three-way sex x emotion x population interaction ($p < .001$).

Post hoc tests revealed desired sex differences ($p < .01$) in the frequency of expression for anger and fear only. In the case of anger, only daycare parents reported desired sex differences in frequency, desiring boys to show anger more often than girls. In the case of fear, daycare parents again were the only group that desired sex differences in the frequency of expression, desiring girls to show fear more oftne than boys.

Intensity Perceived. The analysis of the perceived intensity ratings revealed significant main effects for population ($p < .05$), sex ($p < .001$), and emotion ($p < .001$). The two-way sex x emotion, ($p < .001$) interaction was significant as was the three-way sex x emotion x population interaction ($p < .001$).

Post hoc tests ($p < .01$) revealed perceived sex differences in the intensity of emotional expression for anger, sadness, and fear. Again, it was only the group of daycare parents who perceived differences in the intensity of expression. Specifically, daycare parents perceived boys as showing anger more intensely than girls and perceived girls as showing sadness and fear more intensely than boys.

Intensity Desired. The analysis of the desired intensity ratings revealed significant main effects for population ($p < .01$) and emotion ($p < .001$). The two-way sex x emotion ($p < .001$) interaction was significant as was the three-way sex x emotion x population interaction, ($p < .001$).

Post hoc tests ($p < .01$) revealed desired sex differences in the intensity of emotional expression for anger and fear. In each case it was only the group of daycare parents who desired sex differences in intensity, desiring boys to show anger more intensely than girls and desiring girls to show fear more intensely than boys.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to consider parents' conceptions of perceived and desired sex differences in emotionality in children as a possible source of the children's stereotypes using a method that separated attitudes about intensity from attitudes about frequency of emotional expression. Of additional interest was the comparison of attitudes of parents whose children attended daycare with those of parents whose children were enrolled in preschool programs.

This study revealed no differences between attitudes about frequency and attitudes about intensity of emotional expression. These findings are inconsistent with those of Allen and Haccoun (1976) who found sex differences in emotional expression and responsiveness for intensity but not frequency measures in a self-report study among college students. In this study, however, subjects were asked about boys and girls in general rather than about themselves. It is not surprising, therefore, as a result of lack of correspondence between the target elements of the two studies to find discrepant results.

Turning to the perceived versus desired dimension, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) reported that an analysis of the Lambert et. al. (1971) data revealed that on many items parents perceived but did not desire differences between the sexes. In this study, in the case of sadness, daycare parents perceived but did not desire differences between the sexes. In all other cases, however, perceived and desired sex differences were in agreement.

This study provides some evidence of differential attitudes among the social classes. Preschool parents were found neither to perceive nor desire sex differences in the frequency or intensity of expression of any of the four emotions, whereas daycare parents reported sex differences for some emotions and not others. Daycare parents perceive and desire sex differences in anger and fear, perceiving and desiring boys to show anger more intensely and more frequently than girls, and perceiving and desiring girls to show fear more often and more intensely than boys.

These results then agree only partially with the findings of our previous research where consistent attitudes about sex differences in emotionality were found for both daycare and preschool children. Daycare parents were in agreement with daycare children in their stereotypes about anger, sadness, and fear. Preschool parents, unlike preschool children, perceived no sex differences in the expression of these four emotions.

The results of the present study suggest that daycare parents at least possess stereotypes about sex differences in emotionality which they may instill in their children. It is possible that parents transmit these stereotypes explicitly (e.g., "Boys aren't scared.") or implicitly by selectively reinforcing only those emotional behaviors they feel are sex-appropriate. Although this has not been directly investigated, it has been shown that adult sex-role stereotypes can influence their assessment

of children's behavior (e.g., Condry & Condry, 1976; Rubin, & Luria, 1974) and likely their actions toward the child.

Does the finding of stereotypes in daycare but not in preschool parents mean that the source of the children's stereotypes is different for preschool and daycare children? This is difficult to assess in light of the fact that the preschool parents were not the parents of the children in the study, whereas the daycare parents were parents of the daycare subjects. It is, however, possible that there are other sources primarily responsible for the children's stereotypes and parental attitudes only serve to confirm or strengthen the children's attitudes. Parental attitudes most likely enter in as one of many variables involved in the socialization process.

In addition, although these results suggest that there may well be a social class difference in beliefs about sex differences in emotionality among parents of preschool-aged children, it is also possible that the middle-class preschool parents are simply unwilling, in the light of the feminist era, to admit to believing in sex differences in the expression of emotionality.

A difficulty with the interpretation of the differences between the samples is that the variable of single- versus two-parent families is confounded with the social class variable. Whereas only one of the preschool parents was a single parent, the majority of the daycare parents were single parents. Thus, working-class parents were for the most part single parents, while middle-class parents were from two-parent homes. Therefore, the apparent social class differences cannot be interpreted easily. There is a great need, however, for further research involving the socialization practices and attitudes of the working class parent, as most research has dealt exclusively with middle-class and professional parents.

There is also a need for further research with fathers as this study employed primarily mothers as subjects and several researchers (e.g., Lambert et. al., 1971; Rothbart & Maccoby, 1966) have suggested that sex of parent may be an important variable.

We are presently considering child-rearing practices relating to emotional behavior as another source of the children's stereotypes since an additional way in which parents might convey their stereotypes about sex differences in emotionality to their children is by encouraging emotional behavior which they consider to be appropriate and by discouraging emotional behavior which they consider to be inappropriate according to the sex of the child.

Reference Note

1. Birnbaum, D. W., & Croll, W. L. Stereotypes about sex differences in emotionality. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Psychological Association, Vancouver, June, 1977.

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